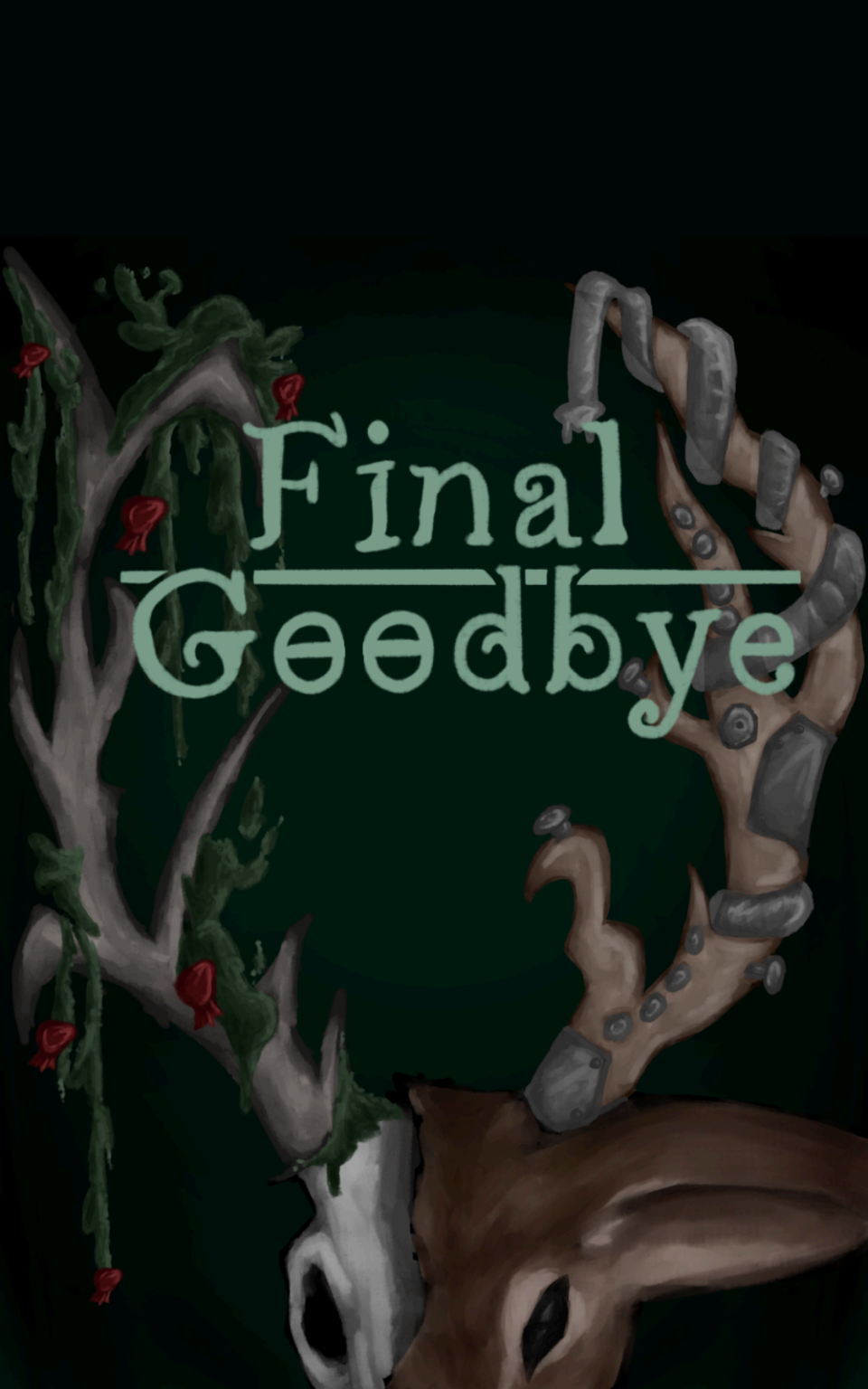
Final
Goodbye

Final Goodbye

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MY FINAL NIGHT OF REST

Act 1

I am a creation from fragments of those that came before, and Your hands put me together. At the start, there is nothing, and I am dead, but You scrape through my body for what little remains and pull it out. None of us survived. It has been so long, and I should be at rest, but You continue to cut me up. There is not enough left from me and the others, so You force pieces that do not belong inside me, and I am not what I once was. It is so close to what I remember, but I should not be here. You push me forward, filling my empty flesh with chemicals that have never touched my skin, and something alive and full of energy runs through me. I do not have a beating heart right now, but something within me is forced awake, and I can not think, yet I am alive.

For the first time, the thin metal door through which the shadows of Your hands reach into my home is left

open. No horrendous monster is waiting on the other side. The only thing past the wall is a small room with a smaller pile of bright red fruit. I glance at the hard, budding food hanging from plants in my home, which has little smell compared to the sharp sweetness from beyond. Echoes of my hooves hitting the cold, hard floor interrupt the repetitive chirping song that loops on forever. Painted winged animals cover the walls in bright yellows and oranges, one made to sit over the door, and I peer under it before stepping forward. Inside, I cautiously pick up one of the fruits, which is so red it almost blurs into the area surrounding it. My fangs dig into the hard shell as I bite, and eventually it cracks. The juice's scent is sweeter than it should be, and it sticks to the warmer air, clouding my senses as I dig out soft flesh from the skin.

A second fruit is between my teeth right after I finish the first, but as hot liquid drips out, the door snaps shut so fast that the ground rattles. I jump, and the fruit hits the floor with a thud as I drop it and ram into the closed door, but it holds still as the floor moves. My body continues to thrash, hitting and biting everything I can, but the space is so bare and nothing I do changes anything. Blood runs faster and farther than my legs ever have as my heart beats wildly, and I start to shake while my hooves step away from the front, into the farthest corner. I begin to

settle and ask myself if I will finally see what You look like beyond grabbing hands after all this time. Many long moments pass before the door rolls open, and I try pushing myself farther away as if I can disappear into the walls. The world beyond the room is loud and unlike the repetitive noise from home, as the rhythms of sounds are interrupted by other forces, and the wind is so much harsher. When the room shakes, I finally find enough courage to bolt so fast my antlers catch along the door, and I struggle to get free. You approach calmly, but I shake myself off and bolt before I allow You to contain me again.

The air outside is thick and hot, and it takes more energy than it should to push breath through my lungs as I run. When I reach the start of the tree line, I glance back, and You are watching intently, but You do not move, so I continue to stare. You look more similar to me than I expected, with four limbs and a head, but You have no flesh, instead, a light, wrinkling material covers Your whole frame, and a large bubble shields the area your face should be. You have no defining features like a mouth, eyes or nose, and like the paintings from home, I am unsure if You can see me. What do You think of my body, which walks on four hooves with small branching antlers and nothing to protect me from this new environment but a thin layer of fur? I do not know why I am here, and I want to go home,

but I will not let You catch me. You appear from another door, walking around to check the inside of the box, so I turn and sprint until I am out of sight from Your grasping eyes. I continue through the untamed mess of leaves and branches, with shapes sharper than they should be. Several plants I have never even seen in paintings jump out at me. The sky is hazy and has a faint orange tint that sticks to my burning skin. Trees that should be familiar are bent and discoloured, while most do not bear any life, and this place is not my home.

As I continue deeper into the forest, my steps slow and my shoulders hunch as I flinch at every buzz of the insects that are too big. Am I alone in these woods, besides Your scent that lingers through every breath of air, so I walk towards the only constant sound, which leads me to running water. When I arrive at the river, the water tastes of dirt and is warm on my tongue, but I drink it anyway and wait because if there are others, they must need water as well. Once my bones lay along the ground and the sun dims as it always did back home, a growl tears from the forest before I even notice an animal step out, and it does not share my blood. Its fangs are much too long, its hooves have split and sharpened, and its pupils are slitted vertically. I step back as it pounces across the river, but I do not run instantly. This is the first life I have seen that most closely

reflects my own. Despite its harsh movements and huge, sharp appearance, I am curious how similar we are and if it could help me navigate this new Land. But its eyes are bloodshot, consumed with red veins, and its steps are stilted. I bow my head to try to show I mean no harm, but it slashes forward again, and this time, it does not stop moving. My long legs carry me fast in front, though they are unused in such a large space filled with bumps and dips in the Land. Roots stick out everywhere, and rocks of every size grow from the dirt beneath me. I manage to climb a low hill as the creature behind me struggles with the rocky terrain, and I am blocked by a thin mesh that does not move when I run into it. The animal is close, so I dash in a tight circle to evade being caught. Once I am in front of the barrier again, I jump. My back leg catches on the hard material, which tears through my flesh. I am able to get free by shaking and thrashing in its claws, but a thick, dark red liquid of pain runs down my leg as I hit the ground on the other side.

The wild animal rushes down the hill where I landed, but is caught in the barrier when it tries to pounce. I flinch but stumble on my injured leg. All sounds of buzzing insects and harsh winds are suffocated by a ringing hum that fills my body. When the creature leaps again, its teeth lock around the unmoving mesh, and I drag myself up

to limp away. The desperate growls and whines reach out behind me, but I do not turn around, even for a single glance. Outside the border, the forest's life is much more faded. Even more trees are empty of their leaves that they should have, plants have a dull brown undertone that does not belong there, but the sky loses its heaviness the farther I go. Instead, a sharp, bitter scent stings my eyes and makes my mouth water to try to get it out. I do not want to continue forward, but my leaking flesh makes me keep going to avoid my end a little longer. I hope You will find me and bring me home, far from this sick Land, before it digs its claws deep enough into me that it will not let go. The harsh air and dust already flow in my blood, and I do not know why You would leave me in this place.

Soon, all the trees are sharp and bent, and there is nothing left to hide what lies beyond the forest. It looks so much like my home, the place You once held me, but there is little life left here. Large, unmoving tents made of a clear material stand tall over patches of plants. They are all the same kind of crop with no differing growth between the walls, but they are alive and thriving more than where I was created. All the ground surrounding the structures is barren, and no animals roam between them, so I do not dare to tread farther out. But I can no longer go back, so I limp around the edge, where trees meet the dead and

isolated life. Around the edge of the camp are huge tunnels that pour out dark gray and brown liquids, flooding the lower areas. Through the roots of every tree, a lack of colour seeps up and chokes out the life which fights so hard to keep growing. As soon as I step closer, the harsh matter spilling down stings my eyes and overflows all my senses, so I quickly turn away.

No matter how far I race now, the burning does not leave me. It runs from my nose and mouth through my blood and clutches my aching heart, squeezing it to beat faster, more frantic as I try to hold on. My life floods out of the gash in my leg, but I can not make myself stop. I need food, but the once raw yet abundant fruit bushes are twigs, long dead in the ground. I do not try to eat any of the tough plants here despite my stomach growling louder than I could with my mouth, so without telling my legs to, they slow down. After continuing into the spiky Land, I find a short, cut up tunnel made from the same smooth, cold metal that You built the barriers, which held together my home. For this moment, I rest squished between my past and the hope I will not walk into the same Land in the morning. It is the scared wish for something to fix itself while it bleeds out, and I do not know how to help. A light patter of water falls, rattling the roof above me. I shift farther into the tube. Between the tapping rain, a familiar

chirping rings down. It is the same sound I heard echo so many times before, and tonight I am back home, inside my strong walls, with the same song to keep me company and Your watchful eyes looking down. I cannot see You or the creature singing, but I know You are there, and fall to a harsh, dreamless sleep.

When I wake, I smell You everywhere, under the dirt beneath me, the air around me and on my skin, but You are nowhere in sight. I am not within the safety of the walls I spent my whole life in, but close to home with no way of reaching it. A plate with two familiar sweet fruits lies in front of me, and with my shaking body, I tread forward to eat. Once I am done, my stomach still turns, and I lick the dish to avoid missing anything, but it is not enough. When I peer back to where I was lying, I find spots of blood littering the dirt, but my leg holds stable, and as I inspect it closer, I notice a thread holding my broken skin together. I freeze, and I can not believe You altered me in the night, and I did not wake. My eyes scan the forest but find You nowhere in sight, yet Your smell stays with me. The ground is wet, but no more water falls from the sky, yet a recognizable song rings out. It gets louder as a small creature flies down and aims directly for my antlers. I stumble away, and it messily swoops to a nearby branch. It stares down and tilts its head, which is not much smaller

than my hoof. Its wings are shorter than they should be and are lighter than the patterns covering its body, and they hold long, sharp feathers which contrast with the rest of its scaly limbs. The animal's tail is long, like my own, but has spikes at the end in place of my fur. It jumps back into the air and swoops around me, which I follow with my eyes. It is no longer a painting, yet it moves choppily through the air as if it was never meant to fly. Could it be real? The animal continues to sing, and I tilt my head. When it tries to land on me again, I do not flinch or leap away, and when it perches on my antler, it feels right.

I am hesitant to step forward in case I scare the small winged creature, since I do not want it to jump off and for me to lose my only friend, the only thing that reminds me of home. It takes a few moments before Small Wings starts singing, and I take the smallest step, careful to keep my body level as I do. The animal makes no detectable movements on my antler, so I continue forward as gently as I can and begin my hunt for more food. No bushes of fruit

grow, nor plates remain on the ground. The places where a familiar scent hangs are left with only dry skeletons of branches, which snap and bear no life. No matter how far I wander, no more colour drips into the Land, and soon my stomach aches so much that I can not keep walking, so I lie down to rest. There is one plant whose leaves hold a greenness that the others have lost, so I bite. It is sour and stings my tongue, its unnatural veins are hard and poke me, so I spit out the leaf, and my body crunches into itself.

Song fills the air, so I search the sky above and find more of the tiny golden animals flying towards me, and I stand. I do not have time to react as Small Wings jumps up from my antlers briefly to swipe its claw before drifting down to its original spot. It hisses to scare them further away, and I stumble back as the two scatter into the trees, a few of their sharp feathers falling as they land and glance down. Small Wings makes a huffing noise, so I start to walk into the forest to avoid any fighting. Once we are near the building that smells of You, I lie to rest, and Small Wings flies to perch on the roof high above me, scanning the Land. My eyelids close over me, and there is a darkness in the day that is older than myself.

That darkness is still there when I open my eyes again, and a growl chases Small Wings between the trees as a clawed creature runs close behind it. Sleep has taken some

of my pain, so I am able to stand and rear my front legs, making the animal immediately freeze in my presence, as it is less than half my size. This does not stop me from trying my best to growl back, using only two long teeth to sharpen the sound, and I can not take my eyes off of its claws, fangs, and it is the creature that chased me before, but now I am the bigger, scarier one. Its shoulders hunch rapidly as it tries to make itself smaller, but my hooves do not stop stomping until it has turned to run and is completely gone from sight. I take several moments of wide eyes and a fast beating heart before I finally peer up at Small Wings, who is happily eating a piece of dark fruit on the building's roof. I stomp my hoof lightly and chuff out a breath, but Small Wings only chitters back before finishing its meal and jumping down onto my antlers again like it owns them. Despite the small animal I scared away, there were no other visits in the night. Could the one who hunted me before have given up? Or did it not want to fight near the building, where Your heavy gaze would even the odds? Could You have already done something to the creature? I circle the structure a few times, looking for places I might slip through, places You might have left open for me. There is a vent high up, but with no way for me to reach it, and several doors decorate the barren walls, but none move under my hooves.

When Small Wings jumps off my antlers and glides shakily into the woods, I stop my circling. Small Wings stumbles before landing on a branch, and turning back, waiting, so I cautiously start towards the trees and hope nothing I know too well lies hidden beyond them. I follow Small Wings, who flies from branch to branch, stuttering in the air and wobbling after each jump. Finally, it sits on a tree right over a pond for a moment, and I peer into the surface to find the skin peeling from my antlers, but it is too soon. It happened before I left, so why am I changing again? I do not want to believe You did it, but I no longer know what You are capable of, so I turn from my rippled image in the water's surface as Small Wings glides off. On one of the closest trees, I rub my antlers on the rough bark to get the remaining pieces of flesh off until I only feel short nubs of sensitive bone remaining on my head.

Before I can look into the lake's reflection, my home's song returns, and I stick my neck around a tree to try to hide. But nothing stops Small Wings from landing on the ground in front of me and looking up. When I do not move, it flies and sits on my back, away from my face. I gently straighten and turn towards the creature, which tilts its head but does not fly off after seeing my shed antlers. My head bows towards the animal, and it nods. At first, I am unsure of what to do next, until Small Wings jumps up and

circles me before calmly gliding forward in the air, so I follow. After a few steps, it drifts down to rest on me in the same spot, and I continue in the direction it led me. We travel farther, as I want to know what else might exist within the barrier, but the plants become a monotonous gray, which chokes out any smells which might live under the Sickness that grows here.

Finally, I find a shadow between trees, and when I move closer, I see that it is You. Sharp feathers from the golden winged animals scatter the ground, and You pick them up, placing them in a bag, and for a moment, I wonder if I still want to go home, if You would take me. Then You turn and pick up the sharp scales behind You, and finally You notice me in the forest. I am frozen, waiting to see what You might do, but You only step back carefully, as if You think I will not see You if You move only a little. Emotions swirl inside me, and I can not separate them from each other, and all I want to do is scream and stomp my hooves because You abandoned me here before, and You are doing it again. However, all I do is become a statue and let You slip out of sight. Did I ever see You? Did You ever see me, back when I was home? I turn and do not wish to get lost in the Sickness that covers me again, so I walk to the large gray building. It is where You first kicked me out and left me to fend for myself, and I still hope I might find you

returning into its walls. You are not outside, so I roam around it, where I find a short pipe that sticks from a wall and covers me when I lie under it. Small Wings curls on my back and closes its eyes while I scan the darkening woods. This time, I do not sleep. I can not fully rest with traces of the Sick clinging to my fur, trying to burrow deeper within my flesh than I could know.

Through the night, noise spills between trees without a consistent beat, and I wait for a specific creature to stumble out, but the darkness holds still. My eyes close only momentarily as I turn my face up to feel the gentle wind, which shifts constantly. There are no patterns in the forest, it switches and sways in whatever direction it wants, and the life living here follows. What happens if I cannot keep up with the rapidly changing Land? What if it changes so much that I no longer recognize where I am or what I have become? The only steady rhythm is the sun and moon, so when light starts to seep into the edges of the dusty sky, I find comfort within it. But in that relief comes more chaos as a horde of the small winged animals soar through the air. They are all real, and it is more than I have seen together, even in paintings, and their gold scales shimmer and shift against the darkness, catching the fleeting moonlight. I glance briefly at Small Wings on top of the building, who turns away from the scene and curls around itself. My gaze

returns to the sight of animals dancing in the sky, connecting the moon to the coming sunrise, and gold becomes endlessly brighter under the silver light. As they dance, I notice gaps in the group that look as though they should be filled but remain empty. As the flock disperses, the brighter the day gets, I do not follow them into the woods and only stare from afar.

Once the last creature has left my sight and the sun heats the Land, my stomach growls loud enough to wake Small Wings. I tread lightly around the building, wanting to be quiet and listen to see if You are moving inside, but am met with a strict silence. There is a single fruit on the plate, and after eating the food and licking all the juice from the dish, my body is still tired and twisting around me. I try to eat the tough skin, but the bitter kick makes me instinctively spit it out. Now that I have eaten the Sickness raw, the taste will not leave my mouth. I wait for You to come outside and let me back in, or make me feel better, like You have done so many times before, but I keep pacing laps and no doors open, only the fruit, which holds traces of Sickness, are left out for me. Now I do not know if this is Your attempt to help me or if You have been poisoning me all along. Small Wings comes and goes as I circle where You rest safely in Your walls, watching me and waiting to see what I will do. I do not understand what You want from

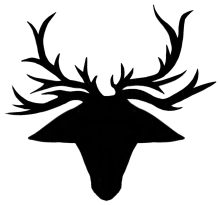
me, if You can even do such things. Food always appears in limited amounts. Soon, I am so sensitive to the Sickness that it is all Your offerings become, so I stop eating, and each time a new plate emerges, I pass it by. Your gifts go untouched and mould, and I walk until my legs give out under me before I accept Your poison.

When I wake again, it is not under the endless sky. There is a material trying to mimic rock that is just wrong enough to know for sure that I am not home. I am not trapped, due to the opening that lets light drift in, and I recognize the trees, which tell me I am right next to Your building, so I do not move right away. My eyes close, and Your scent fills my nose, and I can not tell where it comes from, because you are everywhere, yet I rarely see Your form. The sun's rays melt the fur from flesh as I step outside, and a song streams into the air. Something still and heavy presses against my back as I walk, and a thin tube pierces my flesh, leading deeper into my body than anything should go as it becomes my veins. This thing that is other than myself feeds liquid right into my blood to fuel my sickening organs, and I do not know why I still am.

Small Wings lands on me while I stumble into the forest, away from the building, and every step feels wrong, as something pulls me down, but I do not listen. When I reach the murky lake, it ripples and shifts under my gaze as

I stare at my body and the device attached inside me. There is a bag of almost clear liquid strapped to my back, and it is fed into me by a thin tube near my front leg. Finally, my eyes shift up to my head. The antlers that I lost too soon have begun to regrow, but they are not the straight, symmetrical bone I knew. Despite them not being fully regrown, they have twisted in different directions, and their colour is lighter than it should be. I do not know the body I am in anymore. No matter how I stretch my limbs or what I roll across, nothing will tear the material out of me, and I do not understand what I am supposed to do. My body is still tired under the energy being forced into me. I do not want to move, but my legs keep kicking beneath me until I am back at the mesh wall. It is much taller now, so I cannot jump or climb over it anymore, and all I can do is look beyond it. All that is left of the Land are the tents, keeping and sustaining the life inside, while You pace between them with bottles of the Sickness, spraying it around as insects try to fly away before being trapped in the cloud. It is the same scent over the red fruit bushes that have long since died, and it is consuming the Land.

Final Goodbye



I follow the faint smell of fruit, more of a shadow than a shape, but it is enough to give me direction. My feet continue deeper between trees, and I walk for days, even after I lose the trail, I keep chasing something I can no longer track. Not a single fruit bush is hidden anywhere in this forest, and eventually, I stop looking for them or a replacement because in my search of never ending travel, my limbs do not tire, and my stomach does not complain more than a light pulling that was present when I first woke. My endless wandering and twisting bring me back to the large building that smells of You, and I circle it once again, only now noticing the small plants faded in the path I paced so many times. There is food left out for me. My fangs struggle to crack its shell, but when I do, the juice pours down my throat. It has been so long that the thought of food makes my insides twist, so I drop the hard skin. Insignificant drops of red juice splatter on the ground, and I do not want to forget what it tastes like, but little exists under the Sickness which floods all senses, searching for an opening to

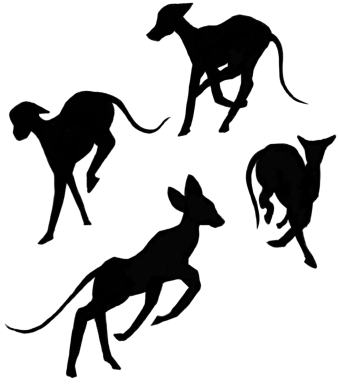
crawl inside me. I no longer have the need to eat or drink, and now, You will not allow me to live nor die as I want.

MY
FINAL CHANCE

Act 2

It takes three moons of walking in circles for my hooves to fully carve out the Land beneath me, so I am stepping on dead dirt, yet I keep walking. When I can no longer move forward or backwards, what can I do but trace loops and hope for something to change. A soft hum from building leaks into the air, lulling me into wanting sleep, but with the energy being pumped into me, I do not have the option to stay still either. Small Wings sits on my antlers, and several of its kind gather on the trees around, watching me as if I can do something. My breathing is laboured and forced, but I want to see around the next corner, to know if You left anything for me. But the only thing I find is the roaring sound of hooves thumping and doors closing as I stride to the scene. Instantly, I stop in front of the door to find myself, but slightly smaller and whose antlers barely poke above skin, and it smells like You, how I used to smell. It looks at me, shocked, and I know now that I will never go home, that I was never meant to. Unsure of what to do, I decide to step forward with my

head bowed, and in the reflection of the animal's eyes, all that exists are my unsymmetrical, twisted antlers, and it turns to bolt away. I wonder where it will find itself between trees, if the Sick will take interest in the new creature as it did with me, and how it may creep into this one. I do not follow, but I do not return to pacing aimlessly either. My limbs take me into the forest after a moment's pause, farther from the reflection that ran. Above me, Small Wings flies before landing on my hardened antlers. The forest quiets as I walk through, as if it is expecting something from me that I can not give.



When I approach the lake again, its surface is still and lifeless, and I can see myself perfectly. The tubes and foreign materials twist with my own flesh, and growing

bones reach out from my mind, deformed and unnatural, and I do not know who I am or what I might still become. Small Wings sits on me like nothing is wrong, but it must know what I am and what I am supposed to do. When I reach down to lower my head towards the quiet lake, I pay attention to the way the tubes shift inside me. I hold my breath as my muzzle submerges in the cold, sharp water, and it fills my mouth. The taste is clear with only undertones of the bitter, growing Sick, but when I try to swallow, my body fails. Water swells in my throat too much, I do not remember what it feels like to drink, and all I can think is that I will drown. The once still lake is shattered by water, which I spit out in large gasping breaths. My image reflected back in the lake's surface is now broken and disjointed, and it finally reflects what I truly am, what You made me to be. As the lake levels out to a clean picture of myself again, I hesitantly move back one step at a time, first just hiding my body, then my head, then no part of me is echoed in the pond's surface. Small Wings glides over the lake, and my eyes track its reflection, its light form standing out over the dark trees until it flies over me and into the darkness, so I follow.

In the deep ends of crowded trees, one of the small clawed creatures creeps, not yet daring to get too close. The

animals on the ground look to Small Wings, but back up when they notice me. I wish to stomp and snarl, but I will not risk looking away from the fast flying Small Wings and losing it to the forest, so I simply follow, and the animals that want to chase only watch as I walk. Under the darkening sky, I drag my limbs towards Small Wings, who lands on the place I was created. When I lay my aching body down in the small tent, I prop myself against the humming wall, my flesh vibrates with it, and I do not understand You, but tonight the weight of Your gaze feels like a warm blanket. Song spreads through the night, and once it gets too loud, I open my eyes, and as my vision focuses, a shape appears in the forest. I jump up, but it is only the mirror of myself who startles at my sudden movement. The Mirror is frozen at the tree line, waiting for something from me. I then notice a plate of red fruit. I have the odd urge to snarl at the creature, but instead, I sniff the gift, which causes the Mirror to step back, but its smell still rots in the Sickness, and the tubes prevent any desire I might have to take it, so I back up. As I stand, my feet sway with a tiredness that should hold me to the ground, but I walk along the building's walls. The Mirror steps up to the food cautiously, and continually gazing up at me. I stop looking back at it when I notice another whole dish with a single fruit left out, so I bend to smell it. From the corner of my eye,

movement flickers, and it is the Mirror lifting its mouth up from the fruit pile, so I also stand straight. As I move, the Mirror mirrors my movements in the opposite direction to lower itself towards the fruit as I lift away from it. I pause, with my neck held high as I watch the Mirror eat, and I am being watched by You and the forest, but now that gaze becomes the weight of drowning water, and I do not know what either expects me to do. Once it is done, the Mirror only glances at me for a second before turning back to the trees and dashing off.

Finally, I move into the forest to try to find Land far from Your view, and I do not know where I am going. Small Wings guides me to a river where water flows violently between rocks, breaking the silence, and two of its kind are drinking. When Small Wings moves to join them, the others swiftly flock away, and it hunches down as it is left alone. I stride up to the water beside Small Wings as it drinks. My head remains up, scanning the darkness between trees, and soon a twig snaps within the shaded space, and I wait until my own eyes stare back at me, the creature made from my same flesh and bones steps out. It watches me for a long time, and when I finally distance myself from the flowing water, it creeps forward and lowers its head into the stream. Was it following me? Why would it follow only to

do the opposite of me? Or does it too want a friend, and I am all that is left? After a few moments, it peers up and glances at me standing paces from the river, making sure I still do not drink any. I wonder if I should stop it from swallowing the water, just because I do not drink from it now, does not mean I never did. The Sickness still swims in this river, climbing into any creature that dares to bow its head into its current. But where does water come from other than this place and the connecting rivers? We cannot wait for the rain each time we get thirsty.

Small Wings soon abandons me by flying over the river to a tree filled with dull blue fruits, and I am left alone. I walk along the running water, away from the Mirror, and stop where a rock cuts the current in half. My legs sway beneath me as I step to the edge and wait a few moments for enough courage to fill me, then I jump. Hooves hit the wet stone and slip, hurriedly stepping back and forth to adjust my balance and avoid falling into the never ending rush below. Before I let the river claim me, I leap to the other side, my head now spinning faster than the water runs, and I am on solid, unmoving ground again. For a time, the Mirror stays frozen, paces from me as I catch my breath before it jumps as well. Its hooves do not touch any rock and make it completely over the river in one swoop,

with only a slight stumble at the end, to which it glances back as it stretches its hoof out. My reflection in the water is torn, but on the opposite side of the stream, it stares at me, and it is still whole. As I get a better grip on my breathing, my mirror skips onto one of the closer rocks that part the current. When it looks around, I take a reluctant step forward, my head bowed, which the Mirror responds to by jumping farther up the river onto a mildly bigger stone. Near me, several smaller rocks crowd the lake, so I leap to a farther one that is still close enough to reach comfortably, and my limbs only shake once I gain balance on the stone, and I peer down.

The Mirror is already on the next rock and jumps again, leaving me behind. I hesitantly step to another pebble, but the Mirror jumps far up the river, away from me and over multiple stones before turning. When I jump again, I am more confident and leap right after my hooves hit the next rock. The Mirror continues, no longer looking back as it jumps over rocks and the current, so I leap forward. We are the racing waters, and I am losing. No matter how hard I try, I can not get any closer to my reflection, which keeps moving, and finally, a rock under its hoof wobbles and the Mirror slips, and I was never a perfect creature. It is not enough for it to fall in completely, but as

the Mirror lingers to regain its balance, I have the time I need to get my edge. I am still behind, but I am now closer as we gallop, and all the rocks shift under me, so I do not let a single one hold my weight for more than an instance, because nothing will stay motionless so long for me to live on. Finally, the stones get farther and farther apart until the last one is far enough away that I think the game is over, but the Mirror does not stop, and it jumps. The gap is large, and I freeze immediately. The rock under me sways, but I hold still as the Mirror lands with a slight wobble and its back leg hits the water. It is at the next step, and I can not go with it. The Mirror lifts its hoof from the current and stares at it for a moment, inspecting its own body before looking to me, daring me, but I do not try to follow, so I hop onto solid ground. On the opposite side of the river from me, the Mirror leaps and gives me a small glance, squinting its eyes through heaving breaths before turning to run deep into the forest, distancing itself from me and any reflection of itself that it might see.

When I look at the trees, I realize Small Wings is not flying over me, and I wonder if it let me run or if it tried to keep up and failed. I turn and follow the river to where I came from, my focus on the trees. Small Wings is perched on a branch across the river, exactly where I left it,

looking at the other golden creatures a few paces along the water, drinking and chirping together, and I too long for my own kind. I walk up to the river's edge and hold my breath as I gently lower my muzzle into the current, but I do not dare to open my mouth. My eyes close as the current beats into me. Without air or water moving through me, I am so still, and my lungs start to burn as they slow their movements. I wonder if I could drown without ever tasting the water, what it would feel like not to struggle, and if I could find comfort in the static current. Small Wings jumps down and glides over towards me, landing on my antlers, and I linger a moment longer before I give myself air again. Despite the Land still being light, I walk to a familiar building, and there is an offering, but not on a plate, the pieces of fruit are arranged along the ground in a trail leading around the back. My head lowers as I cautiously follow the route, and I question if You will be there. A new cave is against the wall, this one bigger, and the material that mimics rock is darker and wet. Moss and plants lie at the bottom, which look too healthy to be from here, and they will hardly last longer than the fruit left inside. I know this is meant to be a den, a place to birth and raise children, a special structure, but it smells of You, it looks like something You created, and I do not know why it is here. We are suffocated by the Sick, as it has clawed its way into

all life and movement. Without Your help, we would have starved, yet You chose to release us here when we were raised between Your safe walls. There is no home for life to grow naturally here, not when I have barely lasted a month and my body is already becoming as twisted as the Land. The Mirror is fighting not to let the Sickness twist it into a reflection of me, and it will not work because no matter what the Mirror does, the Sickness breathes life into us all through the water and food. If we did try to grow our own, each new child would have more twists in their antlers and more veins replaced by Your tubes, and any child conceived here would not grow to be the same as me. Each generation would become more Your child than of the Land.

With my fangs bared, I climb the small stones outside, placed over the flimsy material to keep it from the wind's grasping hands, and I am level with the top of the cave. The thin sheet meant to replace a cave's strong and loving walls rips easily when I pull, and as I drop it, the rock lies over the bed of fruit meant to give us strength and the plants supposed to hold a baby, and all the future You tried to build is buried. I stare at the shapes of the bumps under the laying sheet of rock and wonder what it could have been if the Land was ready, if the Sick did not feel so hungry and tempted by the illness that You brought. My

legs take me into the forest, which calls to me for the first time. It pulses under my hooves, the wind whistles, and it smells more than just Sick, but alive. Something that is Sick must still be alive for the disease to eat at it, and it must keep fighting. In the fast moving river, my reflection is only an impression, the vague outline of what I am, but it is there. The water hits into my hooves as I tread through the river, walking straight through it to disrupt the current, so it knows I am here. On the other side is a tree. Its branches are twisting like my antlers, and it understands me more than You ever could, so I lay my aching body to rest between its large roots.

A hum from the tree fills me as I sleep, and when I wake, I am more rested than I have ever been before. Warmth washes over the cool breeze, and I do not move as the air becomes dark and cold, then heats up once again, and my eyes only open when I hear cries. Nothing in my immediate surroundings is wrong, so I let Small Wings land on me before slowly following the sound. The forest holds still, and my steps become slower as the calls get louder, and finally, I see You, but Your attention does not catch on me. I stay hidden in the woods as I watch You hold two of the small, winged creatures, Your limbs twisted around their wings so they can not fly away and are stuck between You as

You pull feathers from their squirming bodies. Small Wings flies to a branch close by, and it looks between me and its kind, so I step into the clearing. You immediately stop and examine me, so I stomp my hoof and lower my head, trying to get the message across in a simple way. For a moment, You only stare at me, and I struggle not to shake under Your gaze, and where Your face should be holds a void which can only reflect back my own, but You are not like me. Finally, You turn, and I am relieved until You try to put the animals into boxes laid on the floor, so I panic. My hooves beat loudly on the ground as I rear again before storming forward. I run between Your two shadowed silhouettes, who jump back and, in panic, let the creatures go. You turn to the other shadow and make a soft noise I can not decipher, so I gradually step back now that my job is done. As I tread away, You walk into the forest, and we go back to our own lives. I do not follow You home. Small Wings swoops down and lands on my antlers again, and the two that I freed glide towards us, but Small Wings hisses, and I skip back before it does more. The others swiftly fly off and perch on a branch above us.

Then there is another set of footsteps, and I almost expect to find You again, but instead, the Mirror is walking forward, now more a reflection of what I have become than

I let myself believe was possible. Clear tubes run from its back and into its flesh, and now we are more discontented than if we had our own blood. I step towards it, and the Mirror does not move, and I wish it did, because the reflection I give off is disjointed and twisted, and I do not know what it is to be other than I am. All the Mirror can do is move its head to the side, to avoid looking at me and what I am, to avoid gazing into its own reflection, and neither of our mirror's surfaces are clean or whole. Before I am forced to decide on an action past bowing, Small Wings tilts its head at the Mirror, who steps away. Small Wings starts singing, and after a few moments of loud song, the two winged creatures from the tree fly down. Their movements are hesitant, so I step back and give space for them to land on the Mirror, who bows to the animals. Small Wings stays firmly planted on my antlers, not scaring the others or flying off, and when we begin to walk, both Small Wings and I are among our kind again. We travel, not in circles around the building that You watch from, but through the scattered trees and dying plants where Your eyes need to strain to get a glimpse of us. It is a steady stride with no destination, but when we reach the tall mesh barrier that gets taller each visit, we turn to pace along it. The wall has no start or end, yet the Land stretches far beyond it, and I

know there is a place that Your gaze has no weight over and where the Sick fights for each small movement it makes.

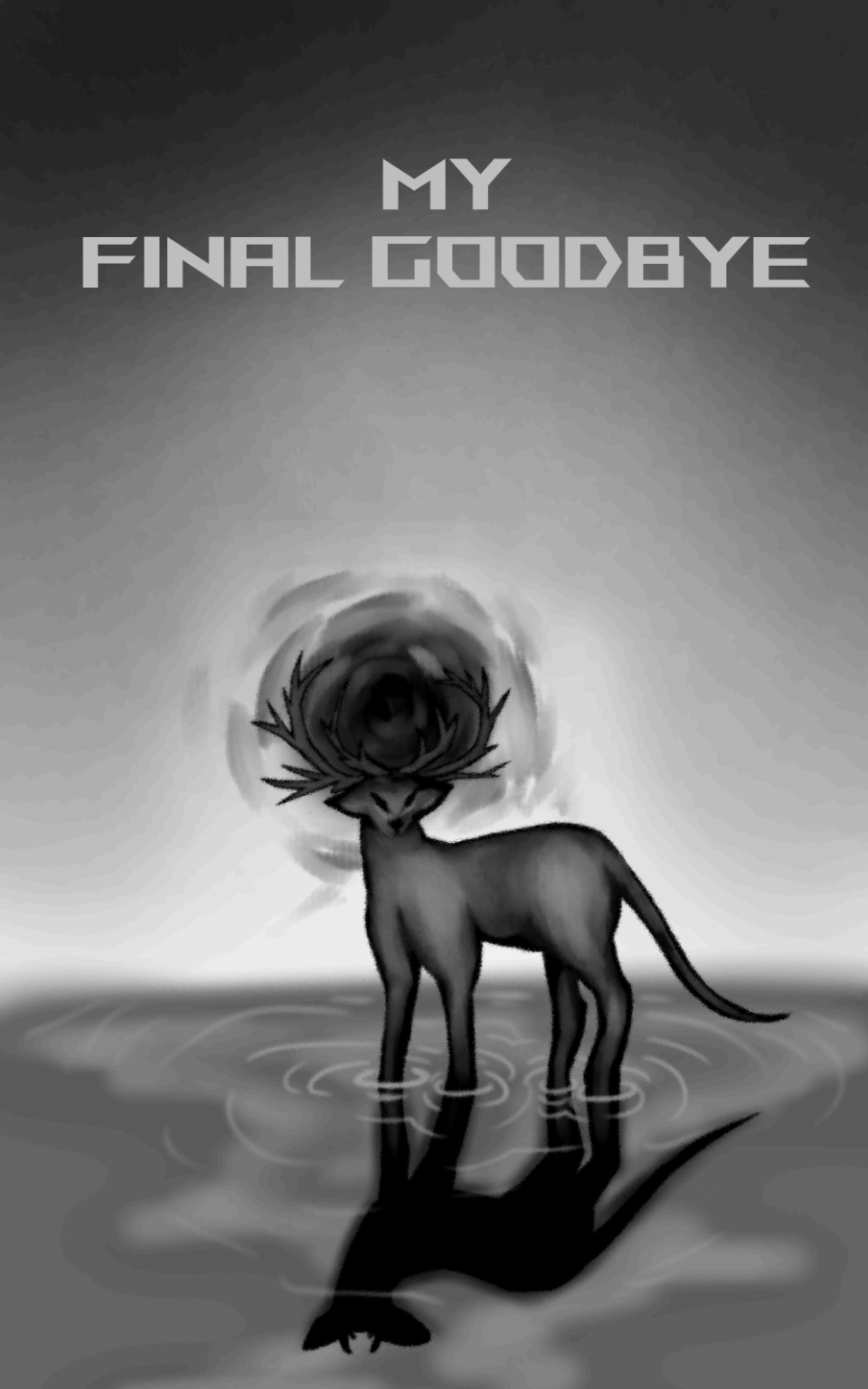
When we pass a river, the Mirror stops to try to drink, but the tubes running through its throat hold the water at bay, and it hastily spits, so I step forward. My muzzle lowers into the stream, but I do not open my mouth, and after a moment, the Mirror cautiously follows, first by putting only the tip of its nose in, then continuing until its whole head is submerged, and I do the same. Cold, unforgiving water holds tight around us, and it swirls, unsure how to give punishment to someone who can not drink, and the lack of air makes my heart beat faster than it has in a while, and I am still alive, so I lift myself from the water's grasp. When we continue walking, we find a plate of fruit left out much farther along the border, and the Mirror digs its fangs into the shell to crack it open, but cannot swallow the flesh, and the red juice puddles beneath it, staining my hooves. The food, not from a bush but served on a plate, smells only mildly of the Sick, so I lick the juice, not enough to drink but only to let it sit on my tongue so I can taste again. The Mirror sticks its nose in the juices for a moment before licking the smallest amount and turning.

Final Goodbye

Small Wings and the others either fly over us or cover our antlers, they sing the whole night as we walk, and there is nowhere to go until we come to a river. The Mirror tries to jump to one of the rocks in it, and while it stumbles, it lands and tries again before stopping to look back. I take that as my cue to follow the Mirror into the river, and we leap, but it is not a race. The river's water now flows against our movements, and we are fighting our way to keep moving together. I know where this stream leads, but I continue forward. The Mirror waits for me, and I wait for it, and we draw out time to dance across the shattered stone path, not jumping farther than the closest stone, and eventually, I land on a rock that is too unstable for me to keep my balance. There is a moment's pause after my fall, where the Mirror stares as I carefully stand, and I wonder if it will run, but instead it jumps into the water with me, and we gallop. Going against the current is hard, but we wait and take longer leaps over the water before diving back in

and splashing each other. When the river finally opens to the familiar lake, it begins to get dark, so we lie together under the open sky, where the sting of the Sickness is strong, but where we are close to the Land, and the golden winged creatures fill the air and trees, circling us as we drift away from all noise.

MY FINAL GOODBYE



Act 3

I expect to wake again under the sun's warming heat, blanketing me, or cool rain tapping unspoken promises into my fur. Instead, I am trapped in a tight, dark box, and I can barely move. The Mirror is here with me, and my body is so tired, but still I jump up and kick to find a way out. There is a single door, but it does not open under my hitting hooves. Before even seeing movement, I must stop. There is not enough space to panic without striking the Mirror too, and I will not distort its reflection more. Without the panicked movements, I am forced to sit with my rapid breaths, which calm me less the more I take, so I focus on searching the area. There is a thick layer of moss on the floor, plants hanging from the walls, and only thin strips of light cutting through the roof that do not mimic the sun well. Then there is Your scent everywhere, the floor, the leaves, both the Mirror and I, and it is suffocating. I try to lie down next to the Mirror, who frantically gazes around the room from the ground, where no food or water

lies in the few free spaces between bodies, because we no longer need it, You have made sure that was taken from us.

In the dim light, the Mirror closes its eyes once it has seen everything. It is awake and alive, and it lies, no longer looking at anything, and I want to close my eyes too, but I know why we are here. Neither of us managed to live in the forest on our own, and the Mirror lasted less time than me, and I wonder how long new generations would make it, if there would be a time when they do not get a chance to try to live on their own at all. It is not my right to expect more from those who come after me than I could accomplish myself. However, no night comes in this place, and seconds stretch on in ways they should not, and I do not think they plan to let us out. With my still beating heart, I want to give myself a shot to live, not in this life but when the Land has healed and I no longer have to survive. My head rests against the Mirrors, who barely shifts, and I move lower. Once my nose traces down to the Mirror's throat, I rest my forehead for a moment, and I can feel it breathing. Calmly, my jaw opens, and in one quick snapping motion, my fangs are deep in the Mirror's neck. It shoots up instantly, trying and failing to escape in the tight space, but there is nowhere left to run. Our fate was decided

long ago, and we can not fight for something that has already ended. I wish to touch my head to the Mirror's again, to say that this will not be drawn out and that everything will be okay, but I cannot move my mouth. My fangs dig in deeper, and soon the Mirror's movements slow, and it stops struggling before it dies. Instead, it lays its weight against me and closes its eyes as its life leaks down its neck and fills the little space between us. The taste of blood is harsh and foul on my tongue, and this needs to be done. Only when the Mirror's beating heart is in tune with the dead walls and it has flowed into the void that it came from do I let go. Dark red liquid stains my fur, and I finally lay my head against the still cold body. I was never supposed to be a violent creature.

The night is quiet and peaceful, and even though I do not sleep, I am at rest. Inside the box, there is no time, and I am back with the Mirror in the place I was never meant to leave. Sickness cannot reach places where no life

touches, so I am only let in for the shortest moment before it opens, letting harsh light spill in, and You are standing there, trapped inside the material that is not flesh, reaching for the Mirror's body. Once again, I bare my fangs, still covered in blood, but now I face You, my creator and my captor, and You pause for only a second. You turn to claw towards me with something in Your hands that I do not recognize, but I know I need to get away. The thing You hold has a loop, and as I rear, You throw it at me, trying to wrap it around my throat. You will not suffocate me again, so I run. My antlers catch you as I dodge to the side, and a tearing noise follows, but I do not waste my time turning, as I thrash and hit until I make it out of that cramped room so I can escape death a breath longer.

The hall is brighter than it should be, the lights sharp, and the air lacks any smell of the dead or Sick. My hooves beat against the hard ground, and I do not know where I am going, but I can not stay here. You jump out from every direction, and the walls cut open everywhere to let You through and look on in horror. There are so many hands reaching for me, and as I flail my hardened, twisted antlers and I see blood. Every turn I make leads to the same hall with You in it that I sprint through, and I can not

escape Your watch. Finally, I run past several doors with animals trapped behind them, and I know one, but it is unlike the vicious beast that first tried to eat me. Now the creature sits slumped in the far corner with its shoulders hunched, and it hisses defensively at me. Before You get too close, I twist and, with all my fleeting strength, I kick the lock holding the animal back. When it clatters to the floor, You stop, and the creature does not move, so You continue slower, and I wait. As You approach, I decide to hit the animal's cage a last time before running, and You chase me right past the door. Once the now free animal sees You, it pounces out, and You flee. With the hallways empty from You I dash through them with no obstacles but still, I find no exit. As I start to think I might circle these halls until I die, like I once circled the outside of this building, something starts tapping the roof. It is too heavy to be rain, so I follow it until I come across You frantically trying to close a vent near the ceiling, but I hear its song. I cry out as loud as I can, a sound mixed between a growl and a plea, and it hears me. Suddenly, the vent flies open as too many small golden bodies fly through and block Your vision, and Small Wings calls to me from the other side. When I jump onto the boxes which held You up and squirm into the vent, I struggle to fit through the narrow space, and thrash

between the tight walls, which are no longer a comfort, and Small Wings calls out again. The winged creatures from inside help push me through, and I am free in the night again.

You wait for me outside, trying to patch the vent, but I storm forward, and my twisted antlers pierce through the material You cover Yourself with, and I feel Your flesh. I am not comforted by the knowledge that You are alive too, that You are made of bone and blood like me, so I throw You off of me, I sprint, and I am in the forest again. This time, I will not turn back. The Land beats awake under my feet, and the air fills with a familiar song, drowning out the sounds of You chasing me. Now I know where to go, where

the river thins to a jumpable width and where the trees are too thick to move through. Once I reach the fence, my lungs burn, and I am alive, without You here. The mesh barrier is too tall to jump over by myself, so in the few free moments, I bite the tubes, grasping their claws into my flesh, and when I pull, it hurts so much, but I can not stop. My blood drips onto the stones beneath my hooves as I empty my body of what does not belong to me, and I am myself, all alone.

My breath is caught by the time You catch up to me in the woods. As You run up the hill, I jump towards You, and Your bones are brittle under my Sickened body, but when I leap from Your back, I have enough of a boost to get my first two legs over the barrier. As I squirm to release myself, more of You appear, but can do nothing before I hit the ground on the other side. The impact is harsh and unforgiving, but I do not care about this body anymore, I only need it to carry me a little farther. I manage to burst into a run, slower than before, but still, I am moving ahead. There is no reason to find a path around the tents filled with the Sickness, so I rush right through them, and You do not try to catch me here but bolt out of my way, and the winged creatures flock above to stop anything from

touching me. Small Wings struggles to keep up, so one of the other animals carries it faster, allowing Small Wings to latch onto my antlers, in its rightful place. The Sick clings to my skin, and I feel it turn deep inside me, but I can not stop yet.

As I sprint, I wonder how far those who came before me reached. Was this all their Land? Or will I bring our bones somewhere new to rest? The open area takes me beyond where You work and where the Sickness has its beating heart, so only small veins run here, and I keep running. Blood is leaking between my flesh, and I feel it in my fur, leaving behind a trail for You to follow, I keep running. My organs start to slow without the tube to pump life into me, and I have not eaten or drunk in so long, still, I keep running, and when I can no longer run, I walk. Small Wings and its friends keep pace with me, following in the sky, more of them together than I have ever seen throughout all my nights. They follow, and they know what will come, but they do not try to bring me back. There is a new scent, one harsh and moving, but it is alive, and I hear it calling me, and I am at the edge of the world. A tall cliff hangs over more water than I have ever seen in my life, water so vast there is no start or end, and it sways in the

same beating rhythm of my heart back and forth. From the rim of the cliff, I know this is where I can settle, where I can return to where I came from, so I can be at peace.

Beneath my fur, the ground is hard and rocky, and my head hangs over the edge, so I look out onto everything and see nothing. A song I have known since I was created is the only familiar thing seeping into my body as the flock of animals perch nearby. Unlike them, I am different from those who came before, I am the first and last of my kind. Maybe I will come back again sometime when the Land is healed and I have a chance of living as I am. Or maybe, like the Land, I am meant to end here with all my suffering. My eyes close, and I am not a creation of You anymore.

THE FINAL END